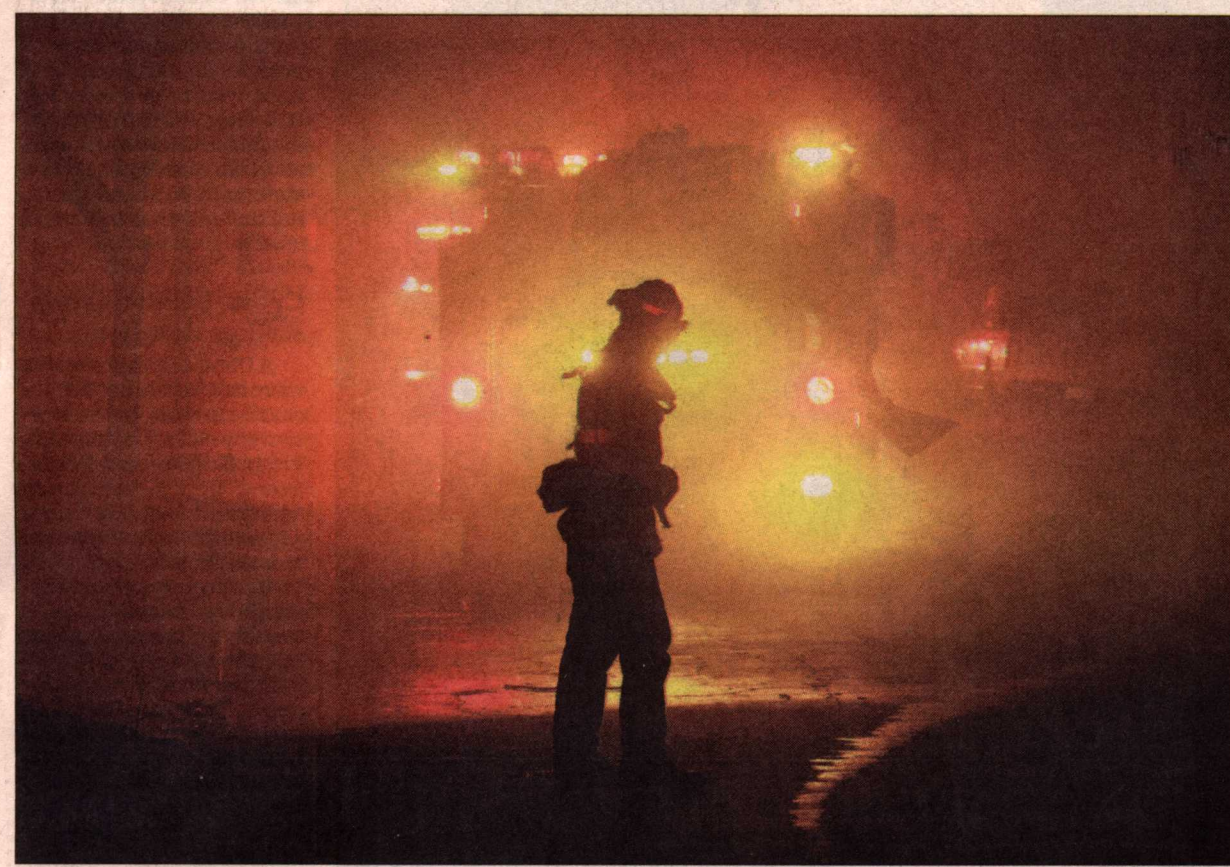


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639 N. Hill St.
Los Angeles CA 90012



WITH AIRCRAFT grounded in the Eaton fire, officials had to rely on ground observations in heavy smoke. GINA FERRAZZI Los Angeles Times

Altadena fire crews lacked satellite maps

L.A. County did not have access to the common tracking tool that can save lives.

BY GRACE TOOHEY

When the Eaton fire broke out in the foothills near Altadena, the Los Angeles County Fire Department did not have access to a satellite-based fire-tracking program regularly used by other agencies, depriving officials of intelligence that could have been helpful in determining evacuations.

The National Guard's FireGuard program, which analyzes images from military satellites to distribute real-time fire progression maps several times an hour, is considered particularly helpful to fire officials when aircraft can't fly. But officials with the L.A. County Fire Department said they weren't aware of the resource during the Eaton fire and therefore didn't utilize FireGuard's data or maps.

This may have left Altadena at a disadvantage. With all aircraft grounded within an hour of the Eaton fire's start, fire officials lost significant situational awareness and were forced to rely almost exclusively on ground observations. That

became increasingly difficult as night fell, smoke intensified and powerful winds pushed flames and embers farther and more rapidly into neighborhoods.

The county has faced months of criticism after The Times revealed in January that officials did not order evacuations for west Altadena until nine hours after the fire started. All but one of the 19 people who died in the Eaton fire were found in west Altadena, among them a 54-year-old woman whose family has claimed she died because of the delayed evacuation alerts.

Not having access to FireGuard during the Eaton fire appears to have made the L.A. County Fire Department an outlier among large fire agencies in California, as the majority of those contacted by The Times confirmed that they have used it for years. The findings raise further questions about how the county fire agency prepared for and responded to the deadly blaze, particularly with how officials failed to issue timely evacuation alerts for west Altadena and appeared completely overwhelmed as embers and flames marched westward.

Some experts say it's possible FireGuard satellite mapping could have better informed incident command. [See FireGuard, A9]

DIABLO CANYON PLANT TO STAY ACTIVE

PG&E deal extends the life of the state's last nuclear power facility until 2030.

BY HAYLEY SMITH AND NOAH HAGGERTY

California environmental regulators on Thursday struck a landmark deal with Pacific Gas & Electric to extend the life of the state's last remaining nuclear power plant in exchange for thousands of acres of new land conservation in San Luis Obispo County.

PG&E's agreement with the California Coastal Commission is a key hurdle for the Diablo Canyon nuclear plant to remain online until at least 2030. The plant was slated to close this year, largely due to concerns over seismic safety, but state officials pushed to delay it — saying the plant remains essential for the reliable operation of California's electrical grid. Diablo Canyon provides nearly 9% of the electricity generated in the state, making it the state's single largest source.

The Coastal Commission voted 9 to 3 to approve the plan, settling the fate of some 12,000 acres that surround the power plant as a means of compensation for environmental harm caused by its continued operation.

Nuclear power does not emit greenhouse gases. But Diablo Canyon uses an estimated 2.5 billion gallons of ocean water each day to ab-

Trump signs order to limit states' regulation of AI

Tech industry leaders champion the move, but lawmakers warn it cuts protections.

BY QUEENIE WONG

The battle between California and the White House escalated as President Trump signed an executive order to block state laws regulating artificial intelligence. The president's power

move to try to take over control of the regulation of the technology behind ChatGPT through an executive order Thursday was applauded by his allies in Silicon Valley, who have been warning that many layers of heavy-handed rules and regulations were holding them back and could put the U.S. behind in the battle to benefit most from AI.

The order directs the attorney general to create a task force to challenge some state AI laws. States with "onerous AI laws" could lose

federal funding from a broadband deployment program and other grants, the order said.

The Trump administration said the order will help U.S. companies win the AI race against countries such as China by removing "cumbersome regulation."

It also pushes for a "minimally burdensome" national standard rather than a patchwork of laws across 50 states that the administration said makes compliance challenging, especially for [See AI, A12]

'Capt. Hollywood' won't face charges

Detectives say LAPD leaders undermined probe of tip CBS got about rape allegation.

BY RICHARD WINTON, JAMES QUEALLY AND LIBOR JANY

A former Los Angeles Police Department commander who authorities said tipped off CBS to a rape allegation against the network's top executive will not face criminal charges, with two LAPD detectives claiming department leaders undermined the investigation, according to documents obtained by The Times.

The L.A. County district attorney's office decided in April it would not prosecute Cory Palka for warning CBS executives in 2017 that a woman had walked into the LAPD's Hollywood station and accused then-Chief Executive Les Moonves of sexual

assault, according to a document provided to The Times in response to a public records request.

Although heavily redacted, the declination memo includes details and a timeline that match up with the findings of a 2022 New York state attorney general's office investigation that first revealed Palka's relationship with Moonves. The TV executive's career ended in disgrace after dozens of women came forward to accuse him of sexual harassment and abuse in 2018.

Palka has not disputed that he improperly disclosed information to CBS, but denied any improper benefit from his relationship with Moonves when reached for comment by The Times this week.

The former LAPD chief who led the department during the investigation, Michel Moore, called allegation. [See Captain, A6]



PEOPLE sing in front of an altar to the Virgin of Guadalupe at the Basilica of Guadalupe in Mexico City on Wednesday as pilgrims seek her help. ALEJANDRA RAJAL For The Times

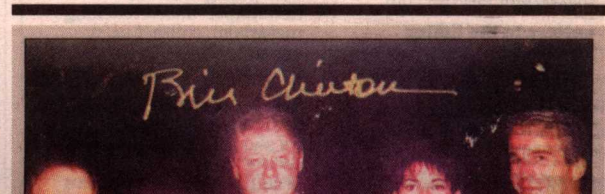
Pilgrims flock to honor the 'mother of Mexico'

Millions make trek to celebrate the Virgin of Guadalupe

BY KATE LINTHICUM

MEXICO CITY — Edivaldo Hernán-

sleeping under the stars at night. As with an estimated 10 million other Mexicans who will make their way to the basilica this month, their journey had been



Investment men FireGuard might have saved lives in Altadena

from his party.

The president then signed legislation that requires the Department of Justice to release its investigative files related to Epstein by Dec. 19. But his past resistance has led to skepticism among some lawmakers on Capitol Hill who question whether the Justice Department may try to conceal information.

"The real test will be, will the Department of Justice release the files or will it all remain tied up in investigations?" Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene (R-Ga.) said in November.

Rep. Thomas Massie (R-Ky.) told reporters on Friday that if the Justice Department does not release its files by Dec. 19 it would be considered a crime.

"This is a new law with criminal implications if they don't follow it," Massie said.

Massie said he was "encouraged" by the Justice Department's requests to unseal court records tied to the grand jury investigations into Epstein and Maxwell. Two judges granted the requests this week.

The Kentucky Republican said the Justice Department is required to release more than just the grand jury investigations, but also files that were not released to a grand jury.

"The FBI and DOJ probably have evidence that they chose not to take to the grand jury, because the evidence they are in possession of would implicate other people, not just Epstein or Maxwell," Massie said. "What we want to see are the facts and evidence that the FBI and DOJ have never given to the grand jury."

Gen. James

erider" in which she agreed to keep the property primarily for her "personal use and enjoyment for at least one year," unless the lender agreed otherwise. Rather than using the home as a second residence, prosecutors say James rented it out to a family of three, allowing her to obtain favorable loan terms not available for investment properties.

Both the James and Comey cases were brought shortly after the administration installed Halligan, a former Trump lawyer with no previous prosecutorial experience, as U.S. attorney amid public calls from the president to take action against his political opponents.

But U.S. District Judge Cameron McGowan Currie threw out the cases last month over the unconventional mechanism that the Trump administration employed to appoint Halligan. The judge dismissed them without prejudice, allowing the Justice Department to try to file the charges again.

Halligan had been named as a replacement for Erik Siebert, a veteran prosecutor in the office and interim U.S. attorney who resigned in September amid Trump administration pressure to file charges against both Comey and James. He stepped aside after Trump told reporters he wanted Siebert "out."

James' lawyers separately argued the case was a vindictive prosecution brought to punish the Trump critic who spent years investigating and suing the Republican president and won a staggering judgment in a lawsuit alleging he defrauded banks by overstating the value of his

FireGuard, from A1] manders, particularly on evacuation decisions, though it's far from clear how it might have changed the response — if at all.

Mapping from FireGuard, reviewed months after the fire, showed it did track the fire's steady progression west for several hours before flames overran west Altadena — and well before the evacuation alerts went out.

"Did they not know that it shifted to [west Altadena]? That then could have been information that would have been helpful," said Michael Gollner, an associate professor of mechanical engineering at UC Berkeley who leads its Fire Research Lab. "Or maybe they knew, but they said we couldn't do anything about it" because of overtaxed resources.

FireGuard "could have been useful ... in terms of life safety and evacuating people out of the way," he added. "It depends on what they knew, and when they knew it."

Some county officials agree.

"It's something that they should have had, but now they've put that into play," said L.A. County Supervisor Kathryn Barger, who represents the unincorporated town of Altadena.

In the aftermath of the fire, the L.A. County Fire Department has moved to integrate FireGuard into its operating platforms. Fire Chief Anthony Marrone said the program, along with plans for other technological improvements, will "aid in future wildfires but will never replace the primary source of situational awareness, such as by air and reporting back from the field."

Barger wouldn't go so far as to say the Fire Department missed an opportunity by not having FireGuard in place, but focused on how volatile the conditions were that night.

"Between the wind and the fire ... it was like all of a sudden it was on top of them out of nowhere," Barger said. "The fire chief has said that, quite frankly, they were outpaced on this fire because it was moving so rapidly."

But some recent analyses of the fire have confirmed that there were earlier signs that the fire was shifting west, though it's unclear how well they were realized by fire officials. At least one suggestion to expand evacuation orders to the west went unheeded around midnight on Jan. 7.

The first evacuation alert for west Altadena was issued at 3:25 a.m. on Jan. 8, well after several fires had been reported in the area. Some sections of the town weren't ordered to evacuate until just before 6 a.m. No part of west Altadena was issued an evacuation warning. Residents have recalled harrowing escapes from smoke-filled homes and under raining embers.

West Altadena, home to a more racially diverse population than the town's eastern side, stemming from historical redlining, would end up the hardest hit by the fire.

L.A. County officials have repeatedly failed to provide a detailed explanation as to why the evacuation alerts for west Altadena came so late, or who was responsible, but a Times review of the process makes clear that county officials were several steps behind the fire as it spread west.

In an independent review of the county's evacuation system, completed by McChrystal Group in September, investigators found that



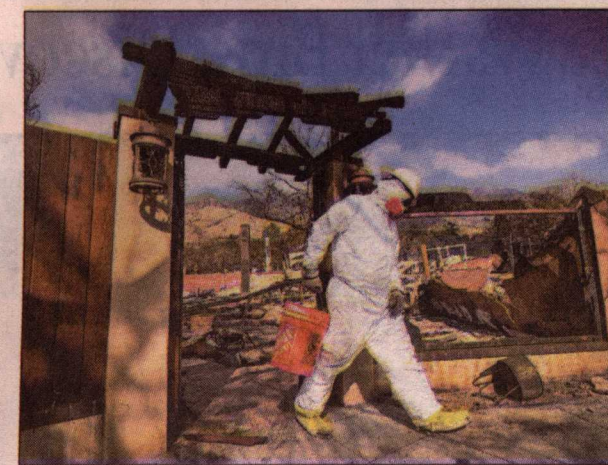
ALLEN J. SCHABEN Los Angeles Times

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GENARO MOLINA Los Angeles Times

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ALLEN J. SCHABEN Los Angeles Times

A WORKER in protective gear cleans up toxic debris on Feb. 4 at an Altadena home destroyed in the fire.

venue, the unofficial east-west divider for the town, according to the state report. FireGuard images from around that time also showed the fire clearly moving west in the San Gabriel foothills north of Altadena, though it was also simultaneously expanding on an eastern edge close to Sierra Madre.

Between 10 and 11 p.m. said in a statement. "When unified command learned that the fire was seen north of Lake and moving west, it validated and acted to issue the orders that were sent out."

Although Oliva acknowledged that the FireGuard maps showed the fire moving northwest the night of Jan. 7, she said that "to be clear, the FireGuard in-

when it had been made widely available to local agencies through different operating platforms.

"The Department was neither aware of, nor had access to, FireGuard until after the January 2025 fires," Oliva said. She said in August that the agency worked with the federal government to incorporate the program as a layer within the department's electronic incident command platform, Tablet Command. Before that, she said, the agency didn't have the ability to incorporate FireGuard.

Shawn Tyrie, a partner with McChrystal Group who reviewed the FireGuard maps, said they provide some helpful information, but he noted the maps didn't pick up smaller spot fires and aren't very detailed. He didn't find the data "good enough to say definitively that you can make decisions ... based on FireGuard data alone."

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Colo., during which aircraft were grounded for the first eight hours of the blaze.

The Times reached out to more than 10 of the largest firefighting agencies in California, the majority of which confirmed that they had access to FireGuard as of January and had implemented the data into their systems and processes. A few officials with the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection who spoke about FireGuard were surprised or confused that L.A. County hadn't been using the program.

Phillip SeLegue, staff chief of Cal Fire's intelligence program, noted that while FireGuard still has some shortcomings — it doesn't provide a full fire perimeter and requires internet connectivity to access — it has still become a game changer for "early detection and ongoing assessment."

"It's very valuable to us ... It's dramatically improved our fire spread prediction," SeLegue said. "What FireGuard gives us is 24/7, persistent awareness."

Guard troops, FireGuard uses Department of Defense satellites to detect and track wildfires, distributing unclassified information among firefighting networks, according to the National Guard. Specific intelligence specialists work to map hot areas of active fire at approximately 15-minute intervals, providing imaging at about a 400-meter resolution, SeLegue said.

Though Cal Fire and the Angeles National Forest both were using the program during the Eaton fire and were in unified command with L.A. County, Oliva said, the county fire agency was "not aware that it was an available tool that could accurately track a fire's progression and no other agencies that responded to the Eaton fire ... shared any FireGuard data with us."

Officials with agencies that have been using FireGuard described it as a helpful application in a growing landscape of fire technology, mostly used for higher-level decision-making.

"FireGuard can be one piece of this," said Andrew Dowd, a spokesperson for the Ventura County Fire Department. He called it "one small tool in the toolbox."

While some helicopters were grounded during the 2024 Mountain fire, Dowd said, fixed-wing aircraft were still able to fly, so FireGuard wasn't relied on for situational awareness.

"On certain fires, when I'm not getting anything else, I have definitely used it," said Erin Opliger, a special projects leader with the San Bernardino County Fire Department, who works on geographic information systems and data analytics for the agency. "It does show [a fire's] general spread."

Suzann Leininger, who works on intelligence with Cal Fire-San Diego County, said the maps from the FireGuard program don't show exact perimeters but still provide useful progression information.

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In an independent review of the county's evacuation system, completed by McChrystal Group in September, investigators found that some officials didn't realize how far west the fire had spread until well into the morning of Jan. 8, as late as around 3 a.m. — when fire had started to spread into west Altadena but evacuation orders still hadn't gone out.

The report noted there was a "sudden shift" in the direction of the fire and an increase in winds around 3 a.m., prompting "an urgent need to assess and coordinate priorities." The report also found that around this time county fire officials believed that all areas "directly impacted by or at risk from the Eaton fire had already received an evacuation warning order."

That narrative doesn't appear in sync with available FireGuard mapping and a timeline of the fire compiled last month by state-hired investigators.

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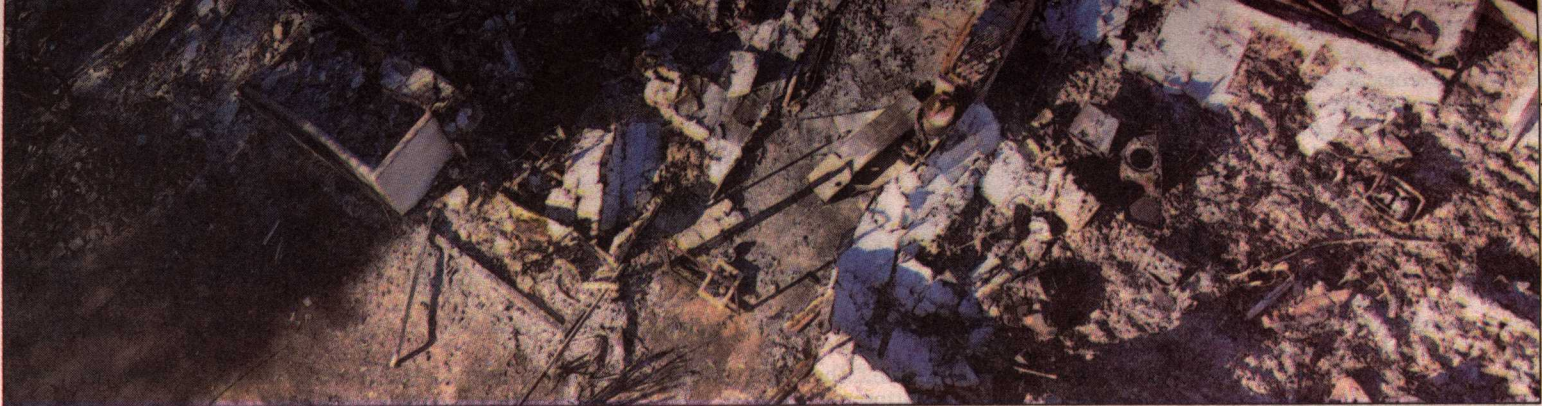
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Still, his consulting firm recommended the county implement FireGuard to better inform future fire-fighting.

The FireGuard program has been operating since 2019 but has been widely available to agencies across the nation over the last few years.

The California Governor's Office of Emergency Services said FireGuard data have been available to any agency in the state through several common operating platforms, including one that the office made accessible to all local government agencies in May 2023, according to Matt Notley, a spokesperson for the office.

FireGuard's constant mapping of "fire-affected areas" has proved a reliable and helpful backup, especially when air resources aren't available, according to several officials who have used the program. Federal officials cited the technology as key in helping facilitate the evacuation of about 35,000 people during the 2021 Marshall fire in Boulder,

Colo., during which aircraft were grounded for the first eight hours of the blaze.

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In addition to Cal Fire (which includes its many cooperative jurisdictions such as unincorporated communities in San Diego and Riverside counties), the fire departments for Ventura, San Bernardino, Orange, Kern and Santa Clara counties and the Angeles National Forest confirmed to The Times that they have used FireGuard data for years, and most said it's used for early detection, situational awareness or both.

The fire departments for Santa Barbara and Alameda counties said they did not use FireGuard; nor did the San Francisco Fire Department.

The Los Angeles Fire Department, responsible for fighting fires in the city and the lead agency responding to the Palisades fire in January, did not respond to several questions about its FireGuard use or access.

Operated by California and Colorado National

Guard troops, FireGuard uses Department of Defense satellites to detect and track wildfires, distributing unclassified information among firefighting networks, according to the National Guard. Specific intelligence specialists work to map hot areas of active fire at approximately 15-minute intervals, providing imaging at about a 400-meter resolution, SeLegue said.

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"It's certainly helpful when you don't have any kind of flight available and when it's too windy to fly," Leininger said.

But understanding the program and making sure it's actually useful — not just installed — is perhaps the most important part, UC Berkeley's Gollner said.

"A lot of the planning has to be done before the fire ever started," Gollner said. "There needs to be a process, because there's a lot of radio traffic, a lot of things [going on] and you're already in an intense situation. ... It's great to have new data, but you also have to be skilled at how to use it, and to make that plan in advance."

McChrystal Group's Tyrie agreed that will be the challenge.

"There's a million data sources that you could layer into a common operating picture," he said. "How do you make decisions based on that in the moment?"

This article was published with support from the Institute for Journalism & Natural Resources.